

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_

## Rene Descartes

Rene Descartes was born in 1596 to a family of the French lower nobility. He originally studied law at Poitiers and then travelled to Paris to study on his own. Descartes studied the works of a man named Montaigne while in Paris.

At the beginning of the Thirty Years War, Descartes joined the war effort by volunteering for service in the army of Maurice of Nassau. His desire to volunteer may not have actually come from wanting to fight in the war. Descartes also appeared to want time to travel and think.

On November 10, 1619, Descartes had an experience that changed the direction of his life. He thought of the outline for a new rational mathematical system. He then committed himself to mathematics and studying the mind and the mechanical universe around him,

The starting point for Descartes' new system was doubt. He decided to begin his thought process from scratch, without the accepted traditions of the church or from his family. He wanted to see how far he could get using only the force of logic.

By doubting everything, he believed he would be able to logically and carefully work matters out and end up with ideas that he could prove were true. He thought that this would provide knowledge with a sound base.

He began by doubting his own existence. This was problematic for Descartes because he could not doubt that he was the one doubting. He needed a starting point. His starting point was: *cogito ergo sum*, which is Latin for "I think, therefore I am."

Descartes wrote his thoughts on his new system in a book called *Discourse on Method*, which was written in 1637. Descartes rejected the senses, because he felt that they could be deceived easily. In order to work on his system, Descartes discarded all that he previously knew and said that he would only accept those things that his reason determined were true.

With this foundation, Descartes formed two additional principles- the existence of God and the separation of mind and matter. Descartes knew that he was an imperfect being, yet he had an idea of what perfection was. He determined that his concept of a perfect being could only have come from a perfect being, God.

For his second principle, Descartes began by saying that the mind could not be doubted but the material world could be doubted. From this, he deduced that the mind and material objects were very different. His thoughts on this topic came to be called Cartesian dualism.

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## **Rene Descartes (Cont'd)**

Cartesian dualism basically states that there are two types of things in the universe. The first type is thinking substance, which is called the mind. This type is essentially spiritual. It is not made up of matter. Everything in the world except this thinking substance is made of matter, which is the second type of stuff.

Descartes believed that a person could use their mind and mathematics to understand the world around them. His conclusions about the nature of humans and the universe around them were important. His system enabled scientists to view matter as something totally separate from themselves that could be studied independently with reason. Descartes became known as the Father of Rationalism.

Other Enlightenment thinkers did not agree with Descartes. They thought that a person could not simply figure the world out by thinking about it. They said that people needed to study the world around them and build their knowledge from direct observation of the world around them.

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## Rene Descartes Questions

### Multiple Choice:

1. Rene Descartes was born in:
  - a. 1596
  - b. 1696
  - c. 1569
  - d. 1559
  
2. The starting point for Descartes new system was:
  - a. doubt
  - b. reason
  - c. method
  - d. dualism
  
3. Descartes wrote his thoughts on his new system in a book called:
  - a. Thoughts and Imaginings
  - b. Methodical Doubt
  - c. Discourse on Method
  - d. Discourse on Doubt
  
4. Decartes became known as the:
  - a. Father of Protestantism
  - b. Father of Modernism
  - c. Father of the Enlightenment
  - d. Father of Rationalism

### True or False:

- \_\_\_ 5. In the Thirty Years War, Descartes joined the war effort by volunteering for service in the army.
- \_\_\_ 6. *Cogito ergo sum*, is Latin for "I think, therefore I doubt."
- \_\_\_ 7. Descartes thought that his concept of a perfect being could only have come from a perfect being.
- \_\_\_ 8. Descartes studied law at Poitiers.
- \_\_\_ 9. Cartesian dualism basically states that there are three types of things in the universe.

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## Rene Descartes Answers

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